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**Uncertainty, orientation to the future and “the economy”**

runner: A friend is better than money

*Keywords:* Northeast Brazil, uncertainty, expectations, hope, land reform, economy, economic anthropology, *oikonomia*.

Benoît de L'Estoile, Senior Researcher (Directeur de recherché), National Center for Scientific Research, CNRS- IRIS, Paris.

IRIS, 48 Bd Jourdan, 75014 Paris. France.

<http://iris.ehess.fr/index.php?id=422>

blestoile[at] gmail.com

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*Summary:*

Based on a long-term ethnography in State-run settlement projects on former sugarcane plantations in Northeast Brazil, the paper questions the evidence of “the economy” as a privileged framework for understanding the life situation of the poor, structured by precariousness and uncertainty about the future. Exploring the polysemy of Portuguese *esperar* (to wait, to hope and to expect), it analyzes the plurality of orientations to the future among former sugarcane wage workers included as beneficiaries in land reform projects, and their strategies to mitigate uncertainty in various configurations. If radical uncertainty lies out of human hands, relative uncertainty may be acted upon by mobilizing people. While money is desirable, but has a transitory character, the value of friends lies in their potential to ‘help’, especially in case of a ‘crisis’. Ethnography thus suggests to move beyond an ‘economic anthropology’ aiming to analyze “other economies”, and set out to explore the fields of opportunities and frames of reference that structure life situations, and the local versions of *oikonomia*, in its original meaning of “government of the household”.

**“Money is good, but a friend is better”.**

### **Uncertainty, orientation to the future and “the economy”**

Maybe it had been a mistake not to sue the union, reflected Tatã, a former worker in sugarcane plantations. “Had I brought the union to court, it would have been good!” In the 1980s, he had worked informally for five years as a driver for the Coqueiros branch of the Rural Workers Trade Union, thus failing to receive entitlement to social benefits. A former colleague, who had also worked informally for the union, later claimed compensation in court, and received a significant lump of money. Zézinho, the president of the local union, “owes me this favour up to now”, said Tatã. However, “I didn’t lose”, he added; “the guy says that money is good, but I think a friend is better”. Zézinho, elected mayor at the end of the 1990s, was indeed instrumental both in favorizing the implementation in Coqueiros of the Federal Land reform program and in Tatã’s inclusion in it as a beneficiary, allowing him to gain a “tract of land”. Tatã justified his conduct by mobilizing a familiar scheme of local “popular wisdom”, often heard in the proverbial form “a friend on the market is better than money in your pocket” (“*amigo na praça é melhor que dinheiro no bolso*”). Why would a friend be more valuable than money? Is Tatã a utilitarian, moved by economic interest and calculating the more profitable course of action? Is he, on the contrary, articulating a “moral economy”, asserting the superior moral value of friendship over money? Or is it something else altogether?

I met Tatã and Zézinho a number of times in the course of a long-term ethnography in sugarcane plantations turned into settlement projects in the Southern *Zona da Mata* region of Pernambuco along the Northeastern coast of Brazil<sup>1</sup>. I argue that interpreting Tatã’s predicament in “economic” terms, be they of ‘moral economy’, prevents us to grasp the complexity of the world in which it makes sense. I suggest it is rather a statement about the adequate way to conduct one’s life in a situation of structural precariousness and radical uncertainty about the future. This situation of uncertainty and unpredictability is associated with a specific form of orientation to the future, epitomized by the polysemy of the verb *esperar* (to wait, to hope and to expect). Personal relationships and resources are mobilized to respond to expectations about the future, which are defined by fields of opportunities and frames of reference. Changes in fields of opportunities and in frames of reference produce various configurations of uncertainty.

At a more radical level, I suggest that ethnography, by paying attention to the ways people conceptualize their practices, leads us to question the very framework of “the economy” as taken for granted framework for perceiving the world and acting upon it for scholars (including anthropologists). This would allow us to go beyond “economic anthropology”, itself a product of such a framework, to look more precisely not at “economic practices” in other settings, but at other ways to construct the world and live in it, or other forms of life.

## **1. Modern economy and its Other**

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<sup>1</sup> I started in 1997 to study three sugarcane plantations in the place I call here Coqueiros, that soon turned into settlement projects as part of the Brazilian Land Reform Program. I have continued fieldwork since, gaining increasing intimacy with families (in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013). The three settlements have 94, 38 and 59 families, holding plots of between 4 and 9 ha.

It is tempting to read such statements as “a friend is better than money” in the light of the long-familiar discussion on money economy vs. personal relationships. Modern capitalist economy has often been associated both with a process of rationalization of time and depersonalization, encroaching upon the world of personal relations. There is an extensive literature linking the expansion of money economy to the development of a calculating, rational, depersonalizing, attitude to life (Simmel 1903, Weber 1968). In such accounts, calculability appears as one -if not *the*- defining feature of our modern world. Calculation implies a common, stabilized, frame of reference, defining expectations. Both predictability of the future and calculability thus appear essential to our notion of the modern economy. This involves a specific mode of relating to the future, premised on constant efforts to reduce uncertainty, or, when this is not possible, to estimate the probability of an occurrence so as to reduce its impact.<sup>2</sup> Uncertainty, while not altogether avoidable, is to be contained by rationalization and calculation.

It is by contrast to this idealized conception of the (modern) economy that economic anthropology and economic sociology emerged in the first place. Following Malinowski, anthropologists and others have amply demonstrated that this was too narrow a view of economic practices, and taught us to pluralize our understanding of the economy. A host of notions used by economic anthropology and sociology as qualifiers of “economy”, such as “primitive”, “peasant”, “tribal”, “of the gift”, “house”, “moral”, “popular”, and so forth, suggest that there are unorthodox and subaltern economic conceptions and practices, with specific rules, which we set out to elucidate in order to produce a more pluralistic picture of “economic practices” than the over-simplistic one provided by “standard economics”.<sup>3</sup>

While this body of work has greatly enlarged our vision, it remains focused by its very antagonist, anchored in our deeply entrenched belief that “the economy” exists in itself everywhere and at all times, underlying all situations, even if it takes specific forms in non-capitalist settings. This ontological belief is shared not only by the extollers of market economics, but also by their staunchest critics, such as the two Karls, Marx and Polanyi, and their followers.<sup>4</sup> For the latter (following Weber), the “economy”, that is the process of satisfaction of material needs, was for a long time “embedded” in social relationships, but, substantively, was already there, even if not recognized as such before Aristotle, who “discovered” it, naming it (Polanyi 1957)<sup>5</sup>. Following Polanyi, Aristotle has been enlisted as a pioneer of an alternative understanding of « economy », in the sense of what Gudeman and Rivera (1990) call “domestic economy”, by contrast with market economy. However, while “economy” is of course etymologically derived from *οικονομία* (*oikonomia*), Aristotle coined this notion in his *Politics* to refer to domestic rule of the *oikos* (household/domain), by contrast with the *politiké*, civic government. For Aristotle, governing the *oikos* (household/domain) was essentially to be a good “house master”, insuring the autonomy of the *oikos*: this involved primarily the rule (*archè*) over living dependents (slaves, spouse and children), and only secondarily managing things. A more adequate translation of *oikonomia*

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<sup>2</sup> This is basically the actuarial principle of the insurance system since the XVIIIth century : while nobody can predict a shipwreck or a sudden death, it is possible to estimate its probability, and based on this, to calculate a premium which offers the security of [monetary] compensation for the incurred loss. Hacking 1975. On the notions of « uncertainty » in economics and finance, see also Brian 2009.

<sup>3</sup> These various dual concepts may be taken as variants of Max Weber’s ideal-typical distinction between “natural economy” and “money economy” (1968: 100).

<sup>4</sup> Such a conception informs the very project of economic anthropology, as is apparent for instance in the recent synthesis by Hann and Hart, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See also Finley 1984.

would then be “government of the household”, thus bringing the political (in our modern understanding) to the fore.

The very notion of a “substantive economy”, that is the belief that material conditions of life (production, exchange and consumption) are logically distinct from political or spiritual ones (even if they happen to be entangled), is an essential ontological tenet of our contemporary world<sup>6</sup>. To go further, we need to challenge the very notion of “the economy” as a taken for granted frame of reference. I take here my cue from Timothy Mitchell, who states boldly that « the idea of the economy in its contemporary sense did not emerge until the middle decades of the twentieth century » (Mitchell 2002 : 4). While Mitchell’s thesis’ historical accuracy is debatable, I take up his contention that “the economy”, far from having “always been there”, a necessary component of any world, is, despite its central position in our own world, a contingent one.

## 2. Expectations, field of opportunities, frame of reference

In the economic framework, issues of orientation to the future have been usually formulated in terms of ‘expectations’. Expectation is an important analytical concept, in economics<sup>7</sup> but also in the social sciences. Mauss (1934) suggested that “expectations” (*attentes*), were the essence of social life, and that this notion “generates economy and law”), while Weber (1968) gave a central place to expectations (*Erwartungen*). However, such notions of expectation are too often generic and abstract. To get closer to lived experience, I appropriate Reinhart Koselleck’s (1995) dual notion of “space of experience” (*Erfahrungsraum*), ‘the past insofar as it is present’, and “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*), ‘the future as it is present’. As Koselleck points out, the fruitfulness of these notions is related to their meta-historical and ‘anthropological’ character (the human condition is necessarily in time) but also because they must be historically and socially specified. To do so, it is useful to complement them with two other notions: *field of opportunities* and *frame of reference*. I use the notion of *field of opportunities* to refer in the widest sense to the set of possibilities and constraints that define at a given moment the “conditions for life”, both material and symbolic, for a group of individuals, what Weber (1968 :927) called “life opportunities” (*Lebenschancen*). *Frame of reference* is the cognitive and normative frame used by people to make sense of their world and act upon it. This corresponds broadly to what in the anthropological and sociological literature is variously referred to as world view, *eidōs*, common sense, frame of constructs, interactive frame, definition of reality, mental structures, cultures or even ontologies<sup>8</sup>. Frames of reference are partly shared within a given social world (thus allowing mutual orientation) and partly defined by singular collective and individual experiences. They involve ontological, ethical, and political aspects, entailing values and beliefs about what is the world, what constitutes a “good life” and what it is to be a “good person” (Redfield, 1965). Frames of reference are both typically associated to a given field of opportunities, and in part autonomous from it; especially, more than one frame of reference may be associated with a given field of opportunities. This formulation does not imply that the “field of opportunities” somehow exists “outside” of any frame of reference; the very form of any field of

<sup>6</sup> Bateson (1935) warned us long ago against such ‘misplaced concreteness’. See also Bohannon 1967.

<sup>7</sup> Following Knight’s famous distinction (1921) between « risk » as « calculable uncertainty » and « uncertainty » (as uncalculable), economists argued over « uncertainty and « expectations ». See especially Hayek 1937, Keynes 1937, von Mises 1946.

<sup>8</sup> I am aware that these notions are far from being equivalent and relate to different theoretical frameworks, but as this is not central to my present purpose, I use a loose definition of « frame of reference ».

opportunities is structured by frames of reference (legal, economic, political, etc). The opportunities actually available to an individual are indeed constrained by both her own and others' expectations and perceptions of what is "adequate" in a given situation.

These frames of reference (incorporating individual and collective experience), define both the ways the world is experienced and interpreted and expectations as to the future. The combination of a given field of opportunities and a specific frame defines individual and collective "horizons of expectation". These notions are, of course, reflexive: they apply not only to those we wish to understand, but to our own world.

### 3. Land reform, and the economic framework for planning the future

In this section I will start by describing structural changes in the field of opportunities in terms of the familiar 'economic' framework, while attempting later to move beyond it. Pernambuco sugarcane plantations, involving the large-scale use of slave labour, have been integrated in capitalist economy since the XVIth century by Portuguese and Dutch colonization (Schwartz 1985). Indeed, Sidney Mintz (1974) argued that the plantation system had pioneered a form of capitalist industrial organization upon subject peoples, long before industry itself in Europe. Pernambuco sugarcane workers have been living in a monetarized world for a long time, typically receiving weekly wages, paid either directly by the boss, or by a sub-contractor.<sup>9</sup>

Pernambuco sugarcane agroindustry became largely dependent on the Brazilian State, through the Federal Institute of Sugar and Alcohol (IAA), subsidizing Northeast sugarcane producers, where productivity is lower than in other regions and, from the 1970s on, the *Proalcool* Plan, fostering the production of ethanol from sugarcane as fuel<sup>10</sup>. In the early 1990s, neo-liberal policies suppressed the IAA, and Pernambuco cane was soon hit by an acute crisis, and a sharp fall in production<sup>11</sup>. This slump led to sugar refineries going broke, and massive unemployment, especially among those who were seasonal workers for the harvest.<sup>12</sup> Some refineries offered to settle their debts with the Bank of Brazil by transferring part of their land to the Federal State. This coincided with a significant increase in the Brazilian Land Reform policy, prompted by the pressure of social movements, and the

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<sup>9</sup> I entered this field thanks to my late friend Lygia Sigaud, with whom I organized in the place I call Coqueiros in 1997 a transnational 'fieldwork training experiment' involving faculty and graduate students from the Ecole normale supérieure and EHESS, Paris, and the PPGAS/ Museu Nacional, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (de L'Estoile and Sigaud 2000). My own work has been made possible by the previous work of a group of Brazilian anthropologists who set out to study the Zona da Mata region in the late 1960s, producing a remarkable body of scholarship (for an overview, Sigaud 2008). A key insight of these studies was that the development of local "markets" (*feiras*) in the Northeast had affected both "peasant economies" and "forms of domination" (Palmeira 1971; Garcia 1993). Grounded in economic anthropology and Marxist studies of "peasant economy" (Chayanov 1966, Kula 1970, Tepicht 1973), they analyzed forms of "peasant accounting" among small producers (e.g., Garcia Jr 1983, 1989; Heredia 1979). Their account of « peasant economy » is similar to the logic described by Gudeman and Rivera (1990), albeit in a different analytical language.

<sup>10</sup> State subsidies to plantation owners started in the late the XIXth century : see Eisenberg, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> In Coqueiros district, sugarcane production was in 2000 one third of its 1994 level.

<sup>12</sup> During the cane harvest (September to March), plantations hire large quantity of labour to cut the cane, while during the winter months, opportunities became scarcer, and people look for small jobs or eat from the mangrove. Especially for those who lived in the outskirts of the small towns, the field of opportunities was structurally marked by this seasonal character.

Federal state<sup>13</sup> expropriated significant tracts of land (compensating the landlords), and divided them in small lots, under the supervision of INCRA, the State National Institute for Colonization and Land Reform.<sup>14</sup>

The ideal of Land Reform in Brazil, topic of heated debate and conflict in Brazil since the 1950s, entails an horizon of expectation oriented by the belief in Progress led by a rational and modernizing State.<sup>15</sup> Rational planning is the means to attain the future. Ideally, land reform settlements should allow for the development of an healthy “familial agriculture”, providing the Brazilian population with quality products.

Planning, rational use of land, development, organizing, management, are keywords in official definitions of the State policy of land reform. A striking feature of projects is the claim to control time and to plan rationally the future. This is to be attained through a specific tool, the Plan for the Development of the Settlement (PDA)<sup>16</sup>. This document sets out to define a systematic plan in order to reach the stage of “emancipating” the settlement from State tutelage, once economically and socially developed. It consists first of a “diagnosis”, successively examining “physical aspects” (soils), “social aspects” (population, social organization, habitation and sanitation, health, culture and leisure, education), “economic aspects” (covering “Productive system and commercialization”, and “Agroindustry”), and finally “Environmental aspects”. This division under various “aspects” is naturalized, as they are associated with distinct specialists and fields of expertise. The PDA then outlines a “plan of sustainable development”, starting with “a plan of economic exploitation”, evaluating the costs of implantation of various development projects, “Basic social programs” and an “Environmental Program”.<sup>17</sup> The urge to rationally control time through “planning and strategy” features prominently in these documents. INCRA officials, NGO agents, agricultural technicians in charge of ‘projects’, typically complain about the fact that people are “unprepared”, that they have “no sense of administration”: having been for centuries “administered” by the landlords made them unable to “administrate themselves”. Earnestly trying to foster the “economic development” of the settlement and of beneficiaries, they strive to make them “change their minds” and learn to “administrate themselves”. Thus the PDA suggested that “commercial agents” be “trained” in order to learn a “strategic” behavior of controlling production schedule in order to maximize, learning to master the laws of supply and demand. For these specialists, organizing the future implies the framework of “the economy”, because it is a constitutive part of their world.<sup>18</sup>

At a larger scale, the same broad categories underpin evaluations of agrarian reform, that typically make large use of ‘economic indicators’ (or ‘socio-economic’ ones). The use of such a framework is directly linked to the political import of the topic. The assessment of Land

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<sup>13</sup> Then headed by the social democrat Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and later by the Worker’s Party (PT), under the presidency first of Lula, and now of Dilma Rousseff.

<sup>14</sup> INCRA is a semi-autonomous agency (‘autarchy’) within the Ministry for Agrarian Development (MDA), in charge of developing « familial agriculture », while the parallel Ministry of Agriculture is fostering agro-business.

<sup>15</sup> A crucial element of the re-democratization process in the mid-1980s was the elaboration, in which rural anthropologists took a prominent part, of an ambitious *National Plan of Land Reform*, that finally failed to be implemented (Pereira 1997).

<sup>16</sup> It has been a protracted process. While the plantations have been expropriated in 1997, the PDAs for the three settlements were elaborated in 2004.

<sup>17</sup> This is a summary outline, with the understanding that more detailed projects would be drawn up later. An estimated budget for the implementation of various programs is included.

<sup>18</sup> While these various actors are divided along professional, political and ideological lines, they share a common belief in “the economy”.

Reform as “economic success” (or failure) has been a critical issue in Brazilian politics for more than half a century. Conservative critics have been prone to denounce the fact that Land reform has been economically inefficient, suggesting that the Brazilian State could better invest money in other sectors, such as commercial agriculture. It is against this background that a major nation-wide study of land reform, funded by the Ministry in charge of it (MDA), and conducted by leading Brazilian scholars (anthropologists, rural sociologists, economists and agronomists), aimed to evaluate both “economic” and “social” ‘impacts’ (Heredia and al. 2004). A significant part of the report was devoted to an analysis of the “presence of the settlements in the regional economic dynamics”, considering successively the following items: creation of jobs; agricultural production; impact on local production; productivity, technical assistance and technological model; access to credit; impacts on commercialization; impacts on the life conditions of settled population.<sup>19</sup> The thrust of the report was that, while the State has failed to deliver adequate policies insuring a full economic success, the material conditions of beneficiaries had distinctly improved in relation to their prior condition.

“The economy” is thus not only a frame of reference for understanding the world and acting upon it, it is also a set of social practices and cognitive tools that constitute a “social world”. These various actors — even if they don’t always act or think in ‘economic’ terms—, live in a world defined by the economy as an overarching framework. Scholars share this framework, as we belong to this world. Their (our) projects and actions are premised on the assumption that “the economy” determines the very basis of our existence.

#### **4. *Esperar*: Structural precariousness, radical uncertainty, and orientation to the future**

Such visions of the future contrast with the ways time is experienced by beneficiaries. This specific mode of orientation to the future can be illustrated by the polysemy of the verb *esperar*. Portuguese-speaking learners of English and English-speaking learners of Portuguese usually experiment the difficulty caused by the non-equivalence between Portuguese *esperar* (broadly similar to its Spanish equivalent), and the English verbs *to expect*, *to hope*, and *to wait*<sup>20</sup>. In English, these verbs convey distinct, even opposed meanings: *to expect* suggests a high probability of occurrence, while *to hope* conveys both a greater uncertainty and an active ‘longing for’; by contrast, *to wait* suggests a more passive attitude. While not claiming this linguistic feature as causal, I use it as a tool for the ethnographic exploration of modes of relating to the future among Pernambuco former sugarcane cutters<sup>21</sup>.

What one might call “radical uncertainty” and unpredictability are structural features of life in rural *Nordeste*. People in Coqueiros have been living for generations in a state of structural precariousness, on the verge of sliding below the level of survival.<sup>22</sup> This condition is however «normalized» in the sense that it is experienced as part of normal life, not as ‘crisis’, a word used to describe situations of acute difficulty.<sup>23</sup> When the situation of

<sup>19</sup> A parallel section was devoted to “the presence of the settlements in social and political regional dynamics”.

<sup>20</sup> This linguistic characteristic in Spanish and Portuguese is a legacy of Latin *sperare*, meaning both to hope and to expect.

<sup>21</sup> Obviously, this structural linguistic feature of Portuguese is not specific to the Zona da Mata.

<sup>22</sup> This has partially changed since the implementation of new programs of redistribution from the years 2000 on (Lautier 2006).

<sup>23</sup> For most Europeans, ‘precariousness’ is associated with a situation of ‘crisis’, and the prospect of growing uncertainty because we perceive it as an abnormal discontinuity unsettling previous expectations. However, structural precariousness has been the ‘normal’ condition for most of humanity most of the time. In many ways, it is similar to the situation of European poor in Europe before the XIXth century (Fontaine 2008).

privation is dire, people say they are « passing through necessity » (*passando necessidade*) or « passing through hunger » (*passando fome*).

One can define two broad areas of uncertainty, on which actors hold quite distinct possibilities of control : one relative and one radical. The relative one is constituted by one's own social world, the people I know and to which I can have easily direct or indirect access. In normal circumstances, expectations about what others will do are defined by a common framework, a set of shared norms and values. In Pernambuco rural world, interactions within interpersonal and interfamilial relationships are relatively predictable in so far as they are in principle referred to the norm of reciprocity (both positive and negative): if one helps someone, one is entitled to expect to be helped later; if one kills someone, one should expect his relatives to exact revenge, killing the murderer or one of his close kin. This is then an area of *relative* uncertainty: one cannot predict with absolute certainty how one's partners in the interaction will react, but one has definite expectations as to their possible actions.

Other areas of life are in principle completely beyond one's control, thus defining areas of *radical* uncertainty. Uncertainty and unpredictability are defining features of peasant life anywhere, as agriculture, is highly dependent of climactic accidents.<sup>24</sup> While some agricultors are more skilled than others, unpredictability is highlighted by a beneficiary exclaiming: "agriculture is a shot in the dark! You may as well plant and get that [large] production, or get nothing".

Unpredictability extends to other areas of life. Popular classes in Brazil have learnt to live in the absence of an efficient social security system, without access to health or life insurance. The poor in Coqueiros live with the constant risk of getting ill, having an accident, being murdered. The experience of sudden death is of course a common feature of the human condition, but its frequency imprints a specific quality on life in Coqueiros. My interlocutors refer to several cases of apparently "successful" trajectories brutally ended by a traffic accident or murder. Such tragic destinies are a painful reminder that rational plans for the future are fragile and lie not in human hands.

Uncertainty, both relative and radical, is then a basic feature of life, framing daily expectations. *Esperar* suggests that something more than "expecting" is involved, embodying the experience that waiting is often frustrated. It has an open-ended quality, linked with uncertainty, implying one has to "wait" while hoping.<sup>25</sup> *Esperar* refers to a realistic hope, while *sonhar* (to dream) suggests that it is theoretically possible (especially with the help of a miracle), but with the implication that it is improbable. However, there are distinct substantives: *esperança* (hope) and *espera* (waiting). As in other places with a Christian history, hope is associated with life, imbued with a religious ring.

*Esperar*, in this context, refers to a horizon of expectation hardly reducible to calculation. People do use some accounting, or compare expected returns when deciding whether to settle for planting sugarcane on their plot rather than some other crop. It would however be limitative to read this as an "economic" calculation. In fact some crucial factors may not be calculated at all.

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<sup>24</sup> While it is a common feature, it is especially stringent in the absence of irrigation and and pest control.

<sup>25</sup> The notion of "waiting" may also be conveyed by the term *aguardar*, which is unambiguous, but belongs to a more formal linguistic code.



## 5. Coping with uncertainty: three configurations

While uncertainty is thus a structural feature, its specific distribution varies according to each setting. I shall describe three configurations of uncertainty, each associated with its own field of opportunities and frames of reference, which, at different historical moments, have structured the life of those living and working on the same territories, what used to be sugarcane plantations and are now settlements projects: life in the plantation world, the moment of crisis leading to expropriation, and life in the settlement.<sup>26</sup> While radical uncertainty keeps constant (despite a progress in social assistance over the years<sup>27</sup>), the forms of relative uncertainty are in part defined by these changes in configurations, and in part by a geographical and social continuity, as the same land, and in part the same people, are involved. For each configuration, I shall first outline structural changes in the field of opportunities, and then sketch out the ways it shapes people's experiences.

### 5.a The stable world of the sugarcane plantation

For a rural worker, the field of opportunities in the Zona da Mata was mostly defined by the world of the large sugarcane plantation (*engenho*), which also defined the taken for granted frame of reference. The plantation was not only an *economic* institution, but a political, social and cultural world, structuring the whole life of dwellers, and characterized by a basic assumption of continuity (Garcia 1989). After the abolition of slavery (1888), the most common way for the poor to stabilize the future was to enter into personal relationships of obligation with landlords, following a pattern of "preference for security" clearly laid out by Scott (1976). While highly personal, these relationships followed socially sanctioned patterns, premised on the expectation of reciprocity. In the standard model until the 1960s, a worker did not ask the landholder for a "job" or a "position", but for a *casa de morada* (house to dwell), with the mutual understanding that dwelling (*morar*) on the *engenho* entailed the obligation/opportunity to work for wages on it, and that the *morador* (the resident worker) was to have access to a small tract of land to cultivate food crops such as manioc and corn (Palmeira 1977). In exchange for his loyalty, a *morador* could expect protection, benefits in kind (e.g. access to wood, fish for Lent) and 'help' in case of 'crisis' (a car to take somebody ill to the hospital, money to buy a medication, credit, etc). When describing the "time of the *engenho*", former workers are often ambivalent, insisting either on domination, calling it "captivity", or on the protection granted by the "*bom patrão*" (good boss); the 'economic' aspect is rarely singled out. The ultimate ideal of a *morador* was to be granted a *sítio*, a house, together with a garden and the right to plant fruit trees, which, by contrast with annual crops, entailed long-term occupation and relative autonomy. From the 1960s on, it became gradually undesirable for landowners (in part as a result of the implementation of new labour legislation) to maintain a large labour force on plantations and most stopped the practice of "giving houses", encouraging their *moradores* to move to the small towns.<sup>28</sup> However, in one of the *engenhos* I study, this configuration remained in place virtually until its bankruptcy in 1996.

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<sup>26</sup> This is but a highly stylized account, ideal-typically schematizing a much more complex situation, changing both across time and space, in the Zona da Mata region, and beyond.

<sup>27</sup> Since 1991, a system of rural pension has been gradually implemented. In 1999, retirement age was lowered to 60 years for men, and 55 for women.

<sup>28</sup> From the late 1960s on, the possibility of migration to the South-East of Brazil (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo) opened up alternative fields of opportunities (Garcia Jr 1989).

In this configuration, relative uncertainty (that could be acted upon) concentrated on the relationship with the landlord, as the quality of the personal relationship was essential in mediating access to opportunities and resources: the *morador* had no legal guarantee of stability (he could be told to leave at once), but could expect stability and protection in exchange for his loyalty. In the hegemonic frame of reference, proper relations between a “good boss” and a “good worker” were expressed in the morally loaded language of reciprocity and ‘friendship’, and expectations fairly well defined, which of course did not prevent conflict and occasionally open violence.

Unions provided an alternative frame of reference, in terms of exploitation and class struggle (Sigaud 1986). Labour legislation opened up new opportunities and legal protection, and union leaders encouraged workers to challenge the landlords in court and “claim their rights”. However, personal relationships between union leaders and rank and file usually followed a similar pattern, described as reciprocity and ‘friendship’ (Sigaud 2006).<sup>29</sup> Significantly, Tatã used this term to qualify his relationship with Zézinho, while he also considered suing him as a former boss.

### ***5.b Shaking frames of reference: sugarcane crisis and land occupations***

The crisis of the sugarcane agro-industry in the mid-1990s led to dramatic changes, defining new constraints and opportunities. A portion of those faced with unemployment, desperately looking for a “way out” of a situation of ‘crisis’, took part in land invasions, led by the Coqueiros branch of the Rural Workers Union<sup>30</sup>. The occupation of a plantation triggers the official process of expropriation by the Federal State; it opens a protracted and uncertain period, over various months or years, with the possibility of judicial interruptions, entailing long periods of *esperar* for those involved in occupations, until the eventual creation of settlements (a stage in some cases never reached) and the definition of a list of beneficiaries.<sup>31</sup> It was a moment both of maximal uncertainty, creating anxiety, and of hopes, with different meanings for the *moradores* who lived on the land, and for the ones who took part in land occupations. For *moradores*, the “frame of reference” was shaken, since the very assumption of continuity of the *engenho*, until then taken for granted world, ultimately crumbled down. Expectations about the future, hope of accessing new opportunities and fear of losing protection were formulated in various frames of reference as *moradores* and workers were entangled in conflicting loyalties, towards their “good boss” and union leaders (de L’Estoile 2001). Many voiced their concern regarding protection when life was in danger. “Who will send a car to take someone ill to the hospital?” was a repeated query, as the local landowners had always taken this responsibility upon themselves. When asked about the future, most people formulated “dreams” rather than “projects”. The ability to formulate “projects” and strategies is dependent on the field of opportunities.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Local Trade Unions have *de facto* become in rural Brazil the mediators to the State for pensions, and social benefits.

<sup>30</sup> In Brazil, Rural workers unions are organized at a municipal level. In Coqueiros, the movement was led by (STR), linked to FETAPE, the Federation of the State of Pernambuco. On Rural Workers Unions in Pernambuco, see Pereira 1999, Rosa 2004, Sigaud 1996, and 2010.

<sup>31</sup> With slight differences between plantations, this process happened over a period of two years from 1997 to 1999.

<sup>32</sup> The possibility of formulating strategies is dependent on a minimum level of “distance to necessity” (Bourdieu 1997 : 262).

At the same time, others expressed “hope” (*esperança*), a positive orientation to the future, which opened up a possibility of action and in some cases the formulation of individual and collective projects (L’Estoile and Sigaud 2006). “Hope” to get a piece of land was for many a driving force to take part in the movement, and incur the hardships and risks involved in participation in a land occupation, while others were looking for a temporary “way out”. New leaders emerged, who tried to foster the belief in a collective future and direct them onto the path of “land reform”.

### 5.c “On the moon”: land reform settlement projects

The third configuration of uncertainty is associated with a dramatic transformation in the field of opportunities, brought about by the implantation of settlement projects. Eventually, three *engenhos* in Coqueiros were expropriated by the Federal State in late 1997, handed over to INCRA, and three settlement projects (*projetos de assentamento*) created. The beneficiaries (drawn both from the former *moradores* and from those who had taken part in land occupations) had to sign a contract of “concession of use” of a plot of land, in exchange for agricultural development of the land by the beneficiary and its family. This “concession of use” is ultimately supposed to evolve into actual ownership, and later into full property. There is thus some expectation of ultimate ownership, but its timing (or indeed, actual happening) remains highly uncertain. At first, it was widely believed that this would occur within ten years, but fifteen years after the beginning of the process, this transitory stage has been dragging on.

The early period of the settlement project was one of high hopes and deep anxieties. In September 1999, as trucks discharged the bricks for the houses that were to be constructed on field where sugarcane had recently been cut, beneficiaries described with gleaming eyes the plans for their new house, and their future life in it. The horizon of expectation in this new setting was modelled both on past experience, and on the utopian ideal of the “freed *engenho*”, combining the security of the *engenho* and the autonomy of the *sítio* (Sigaud 1977). Access to the status of beneficiary of the land reform settlement was especially valued, because it was associated with “freedom”, that is with greater autonomy. For those who had, voluntarily or not, left the plantations, land reform offered an opportunity to “go back to the land”, and realize their dream of having (or having back) their own *sítio*. One beneficiary significantly called his plot “Good Hope” (*Boa esperança*); another put a signpost “Farm of the Joy of Morena” at the entrance of her. While Land Reform is officially geared towards agricultural production, what many beneficiaries valued above all was the opportunity of becoming “one’s own master” (*dono*), that is the possibility to act as a master on one’s own house and piece of land, by contrast with their former situation in the *engenho* or in the townships. While *dono* is often translated as “owner”, stressing the legal and economic aspects, *master* is a better equivalent, highlighting the (political) ability to make autonomous decisions (government of the house or *oikonomia* in the Aristotelian sense). “Autonomy” takes a strong meaning in a region marked by the secular experience of slavery, followed by the experience of personal dependence. It is expressed by the possibility to control one’s time and mobility, “work at the time I want”, as well as “go wherever I want”. Such formulas make sense by contrast with the previous experience of being “ordered” to some particular task by the plantation foreman. Becoming one’s own master was strongly associated with a

recovering of dignity: questioned in 1999 by a fellow beneficiary about “freedom”, Mario replied: “we became persons”.<sup>33</sup>

The creation of the *assentamento* defined a space where specific rules obtain, in stark contrast both with the order of the *engenho* formerly ruling the territory and its inhabitants, —now abolished—, and with the plantations surrounding the *assentamento*. Beneficiaries soon met the bureaucratic world of the Brazilian State, which up to then had been mostly mediated by the Trade Unions. While INCRA is officially in charge of the settlement, the actual practice is much more akin to some kind of Indirect Rule, the association’s president playing a role reminiscent of colonial chiefs.<sup>34</sup> Beneficiaries had to face a new uncertainty about the adequate frame of reference. As the former president of one settlement association commented retrospectively said, referring to what followed the “implosion” of the plantation world, “it was like being on the moon”; he added “everyone goes forward blindly”.

On the one hand, life in a Land reform settlement reduces structural unpredictability, by giving some security and stability. Even if beneficiaries are not « owners » of their plot or their house, and may (in principle) be expelled if they fail to meet the criteria set by INCRA, most of them, after some time, enjoy a sense of relative security, especially because they feel « at home » in what they insist in calling « their house ». On the other hand, their accounts suggest that uncertainty has grown in other areas of life. Whereas those who were registered workers on the plantation could count on a regular weekly pay, they were urged to turn into “small peasants”, able to master a much longer time frame, over a year, and even a period of years, with the need to balance “good” and “bad” years. Such a challenge has however proven beyond the grasp of many beneficiaries, who claim they lack the means to “survive” during the period when one has to cultivate while not yet harvesting. A former *morador* told he « used to have credit in the shops », because he was sure to receive his weekly wages; when in need, his employer, a ‘friend’, would also lend him some money, as an advance on his future wages. This access to credit on an interpersonal basis stopped as he became a Land reform beneficiary.

The capacity to “manage time” is related to power differential and to conflicting frames of reference: while “freedom” is associated by beneficiaries with being ‘master’ of one’s time, ‘projects’ promoters and development technicians aim to teach them how to “make plans”, but actually keep them waiting. Projects of controlled social transformation involve a “rationalization” and “administration” of time that break with familiar temporalities.<sup>35</sup> However, the future failed to materialize as planned: the first great agricultural project for the three settlements, in 1999-2000, ended up in utter failure, leaving beneficiaries in debt and barred from accessing further credit. Most beneficiaries have since become dependent on outside sources of income, such as retirement or invalidity pensions, or wages.

Bureaucratic rule has turned into a major source of uncertainty for beneficiaries. A typical situation in *assentamentos* is to *esperar* for a new ‘project’ (which, it is hoped/expected, might bring some kind of benefit or resource) to materialize. Thus, a beneficiary tells that the district agronomist pledged himself to try to “get a project” of pisciculture. “He told us that early next year he will see if he gets this fish for us, and this project. We are waiting/hoping

<sup>33</sup> “*a gente passou a ser gente*”. *Gente*, which I translate by persons, suggests ‘human’ as opposed to animal.

<sup>34</sup> Associations are the obliged organizational frame for all dealings with state agencies and NGOs. To most beneficiaries, this was a completely unknown political form.

<sup>35</sup> Such a brutal change in temporality has been observed elsewhere in a number of peasant societies in similar situations of imposed social transformation. See, e.g. Bourdieu (1963) on changing orientations to the future among Kabyles, in the context of forced « modernization » under French late colonial rule.

(*esperando*) ». The experience of waiting is reinforced by the bureaucratic workings of the agencies in charge of monitoring the settlement projects. INCRA officers themselves denounce the “slowness” of the agency, and urge beneficiaries to “run after”.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in 2006, INCRA started promising the arrival of a credit for renovating the houses,. However, actual payment has been repeatedly postponed for bureaucratic reasons.<sup>37</sup>

When invited to assess their present situation in relation to the past, my interlocutors balance losses and gains not in economic terms, but in terms of the potentially conflicting values of security and autonomy. In fact, the gain in autonomy entails a corresponding increase in uncertainty: when people were ordered to perform a task, they had no real choice but to leave. Now, choices are much more open, but many beneficiaries express a sense of disarray as to what to do in the absence of the plantation framework. So, while life is stabilized in some vital areas, such as housing, it remains highly uncertain in many other ways.

## 6. Facing uncertainty: short-term money, long-term friendship

To understand “friendship is better than money” as a moral statement condemning the intrusion of money in a world of interpersonal relationships, would be off the mark. Rather it serves to balance and value one against another two “goods” (in the moral, not economic, sense), belonging to two different orders of value or “transactional orders” (Bloch and Parry 1989). Money and friendship are valued differently because they are associated with different temporalities and moralities: money is associated with a short-term orientation, whereas friendship involves a long-term relationship.

Pernambuco sugarcane workers have long been familiar with capitalist and monetary relationships, and there is no moral condemnation of money as such. As being “poor” is precisely defined by the lack of it, money is considered desirable. People strive to earn more money, as they need it to “sustain the house”, providing food, clothes, and whatever is necessary for the life of the family. Money however is seen as utterly unreliable. In the experience of the poor, money withers away fast. The general expectation is that, if one happens to earn money, one spends it immediately. This seems confirmed by the experience of land reform beneficiaries: the program entailed in its early stages the payment of a various allowances, which were to cover the buying of tools and seeds, amounting to a total of 2,500 *reais*, about seven times the then minimum monthly salary, for them a considerable amount of money. As Dona Morena told me in 2002: “My God, I never got hold of any money! I worked cutting cane, going out at dawn; when Saturday came, I went to the market, nothing was left [from her wages]. (...) When I got hold of such money..., the people up here [told me]: “Spend! Buy this, buy that, buy, buy”! I spent it all! I don’t know how to work with money”. She relates her inability to deal with money to her previous experience of receiving weekly wages, and to her confusion in front of the instructions by the settlement leadership and agricultural technicians on how to spend the allowance. Money was spent in various ways not contemplated in the official blueprint: buying additional material for their house (as the official grant allowed to build only a small standard house), remedies in case of illness, or beds, furniture, domestic appliances, TV, used cars or motorbikes. In other words they prioritized the maintenance of life and what they saw as the symbols and means of a ‘good life’. Money was made to serve life, not the economy.

<sup>36</sup> People contrast *esperar* and *correr atras* (literally, “to run after”, to pursue), the latter implying an active stance to attain the desired end.

<sup>37</sup> In 2013, the responsibility for this project has been shifted to another agency, thus producing further delay.

Thus, money is good, as it is a basic condition for life, but is essentially short-term and fugitive. By contrast, friends are valued as a long-term resource: friendship is a personal relation, supposedly enduring.<sup>38</sup> ‘Real’ friendship is a long-term relationship, which involves the willingness (if not the actual possibility) to help, along with mutual *consideração* (respect). The former boss, still living in the middle of one settlement and running a tourist joint, commented to me: “it changed, because the sugarcane ended, but partnership, good will, friendship, are still the same. Even today, if someone gets ill, needs a car [to be taken to the town hospital], it continues the same as at the time of my father, I send my car (...) or I go myself.” In other words, he claimed to continue acting according to the frame of reference of the *engenho*, faithful to his father’s reputation as “a good boss”, and mobilizing the vocabulary of friendship.

‘Friendship’ is used to refer to a wide range of personal relationships, both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ (Rebhun 1999). One needs both friends who are one’s social equal to help in daily life on the basis of reciprocity, and friends who are socially more powerful to help one when “undergoing difficulty”. In fact, need or crisis, is an acid test of friendship. Whereas money, once spent, leaves one basically as deprived as before, friends (and relatives) offer the nearest equivalent to a social insurance: they are supposed to help in case of illness, to take care of the children if someone dies or goes away. Friends are also important to enlarge one’s field of opportunities.<sup>39</sup> Asking friends for help is a morally valued and socially recognized way to act upon uncertainty. Thus, an unemployed beneficiary told me he was waiting (*esperando*) for work by the elected mayor, explaining: “The new mayor is a great friend of mine, he likes me very much, and he told me he would help me, knowing I am in a state of need”. The socially legitimate language of friendship allows many uses; it does not preclude the circulation of money and other resources, but inserts them in a moral frame.

In a setting of generalized unpredictability, the one area where one may reduce uncertainty is by playing on interpersonal relations. Recurring to personal links is a traditional resource for the poor<sup>40</sup>. One cannot constrain a boss to give you work, but if he knows you, he may choose to hire you rather than an unknown worker. This familiar pattern is activated in the new configuration of uncertainty: from the beneficiaries’ point of view, bureaucracies (including INCRA, banks, NGOs, the Federal Environmental agency) act in an arbitrary and inscrutable manner. You cannot control INCRA, but you might befriend the technician by offering him a drink at your place. The World Bank is out of reach, but if one is a friend or relative of the local assistant of the technician in charge, one may end up on the list of beneficiaries of a development project. So, in fact, building “friendship” appears as the single best human way to act in the face of uncertainty.

Radical uncertainty is beyond human powers, but relative uncertainty may be acted upon. Thus when Jo’s son caught a rare virus, leaving him gravely impaired, the only possible cure involved a complex operation which could only be performed in Recife; its cost in a private hospital was over 30,000 *reais* (sixty times a monthly minimum salary), clearly beyond her reach. Doctor Bernardo, a “family friend” and candidate for mayor, who is a surgeon in Recife, directed her to a surgeon friend of his in another Recife public hospital. For about two

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<sup>38</sup> Friends are different from “family”, that entails duties seen as “natural” (especially between parents and children). By contrast, “friendship” includes an element of choice.

<sup>39</sup> The networks of kin, friends and neighbours were mobilized in the process of the occupation of the plantations (L’Estoile and Sigaud 2006; Sigaud 2010).

<sup>40</sup> “Sharing resources within communal organizations and reliance on ties with powerful patrons were recurrent ways in which peasants strove to reduce risks and to improve their stability” (Wolf 1971). Cf. Foster 1961, Pitt-Rivers 1971.

years, she hoped/waited (and prayed) until the operation was finally performed in 2012. « It's better to have a friend around than money in the bank », commented the surgeon, explaining it was Dr Bernardo's insistence that led him to prioritize Jo's son over a long list of patients. Jo pointed out that Dr Bernardo "did not even ask me to vote for him". Not *asking* for something in return was for her a mark of *consideração*, of true 'friendship', as opposed to an interested move (she of course voted for him). Jo, having converted to Pentecostalism during her son's illness, also offered a thanksgiving service.

For most of my interlocutors, hope is ultimately related to God, who lends it meaning. It is precisely because the future is unpredictable that one has to trust God. God is by no means an insurance: He does not always prevent misfortune, but He may help you to cope with it. God does not only offer a consolation for the evils of the present, but also offers a stable point in an otherwise uncertain world, providing unique certainty. The repeated statement that "God is greater, "God is powerful", especially among Pentecostal believers, suggests that, while God's plans cannot be known, He knows what is best, and can control the future. God has the power to release one's son from prison, to help finding food if one is hungry, to reconcile wife and husband or to crush your enemies<sup>41</sup>. This is not "economy", not even a "religious economy", but an alternative definition of reality.

### **Conclusion: from "the economy" to "living and good living"**

"Money is good, but a friend is better" could be construed as an "economic" formulation (with the utility of a friend being superior to the one of liquidity). However, I argued that such a statement instantiates a specific mode of coping with precariousness, articulating hierarchically two "transactional orders" or "spheres of value". Uttering formulas like this one involves a statement about the state of the world, where the future is uncertain, about the proper attitudes for those who face it, and a moral claim to be a "good person".

The openness of *esperar* thus reflects the indeterminacy of the future, and the uncertain character of life. While these are general features of the human condition, they deeply affect life situations in Pernambuco settlement projects. In this world, marked by radical uncertainty, the future appears irreducible to calculation. It is a field of open expectation, which involves both *espera* (waiting) and *esperança* (hope). While reducing structural uncertainty is impossible, the poor, in Brazil as elsewhere, have been devising alternative ways of coping with structural precariousness, and with unexpected (but probable) accidents. These strategies involve both investment in social relationships (making friends) and trust in God, who ultimately guarantees that hope is not vain. *Esperar* also makes apparent that expectations, framed by previous 'experience', are attuned to a given configuration of uncertainty, hold for a given world, defined by specific field of opportunities and framework of reference. When that setting changes, expectations become unadjusted, producing a sense of cognitive and moral disorientation (Schutz 1943).

This invites us to challenge more fundamentally the very framework of 'the economy'. Those for whom the economy is a basic ontological tenet tend to think of those who do not see the world in such terms as naïve, ignorant, or alienated, because they fail to grasp the basic structure of reality. This is especially the case when referring to the poor, as if, in a situation of deprivation, they should privilege their most 'basic' needs, i.e. the 'economic' ones. Thus many discussions, both political and scholarly, of Land reform settlements tend to be framed

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<sup>41</sup> I draw here on statements heard during evangelical religious services and daily conversations.

by issues of “economic success” (or failure), whereas for its beneficiaries concerns of “autonomy” and protection are much more pressing.

When our interlocutors speak of “work”, of “salary”, of “selling”, of “money”, of “going to the market”, of “sustaining the house”, our own framework misleads us into understanding these as primarily “economic”. However, when referring to such realities, they are not articulating a “peasant view of the economy”, or a “moral economy”; they are talking about how to live and live well, how to articulate the striving for autonomy and the need for protection. The decision to plant or not a particular crop depends not only on the quantity of labor one is able to mobilize and on the estimate of future prices, but also on taking into account the possibility of being stolen or even killed. The concern for security is not “economic”, but regards the conditions and means necessary to “live and live well”, to use Aristotelian categories.<sup>42</sup> This Pernambucan version of *oikonomia*, in the sense of “government of the household”, encompassing concerns for “sustaining the house” by providing material and social resources and “security”, involves autonomy, morals, religion, reproduction, politics, and a capacity for manoeuvring in a complex and fluid world.

Phenomena usually accounted for as “economic”, such as the crisis of the sugarcane agro-industry in the mid-1990s, the decline of foreign tourism following the rise of the exchange-rate of the *real*, the policy of social redistribution of the Brazilian federal state, have indeed been instrumental in redefining the sets of opportunities and constraints faced by my interlocutors. Moreover, many of these structuring factors, such as subsidizing or not the sugarcane agro-industry, investing Federal money in buying land for settlements or developing agricultural exports, have been brought about by people thinking and acting within the ‘economic’ framework (Neiburg 2011).

We have the greatest difficulty in imagining a world outside the framework of ‘the economy’. Even if, along Polanyi, they are critical of the reductionism of free market economics, economic anthropologists take for granted in a loosely Marxian way that ‘the economy’ provides the infrastructure or “material basis” of other (social, cultural, political, religious) phenomena. As inhabitants of the modern Western world, we have fully incorporated the division of life into distinct institutional spheres: the ‘economic’, the ‘political’, the ‘social’, the ‘religious’. By establishing ‘the economic’ as a specific level or “sphere”, distinct from ‘the social’ and ‘the political’, we de-socialize and de-politicize it; compartmenting ‘the economic’ and ‘the religious’ prevents us from seeing the ontological and cosmological dimensions of “the economy”. We have incorporated ‘the economy’ as a frame of reference, indeed, as an ontological principle, to the point that we literally project it everywhere, and when we look at unfamiliar settings, see “other economies”. Even when endeavoring to pluralize the notion of ‘economy’, it is still the latter that provides the explicit or implicit standard in relation to which we define our own, critical, approaches.

Naturalizing the use of economic categories as a privileged tool to understand the world has been framing anthropological imagination in a straightjacket, blinding us to alternative understandings. In order to rethink the economy, we should, at least as a temporary experiment, suspend our use of the language of economics and of *the economy*. What happens if we look at such configurations not as “other economies” but as “something other than economy”? Instead of trying to qualify standard economic accounts by looking at what is “lacking” in them, we may want to explore the world of ‘the economy’ from the viewpoint of

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<sup>42</sup> As Bensa (2006: 105) writes about gift accounting among his Kanak interlocutors, “interest is here to be understood in the widest sense, at the same time social and vital since strategy is motivated more by a gain in life than by a mercantile project. It is a “life insurance”, say the actors” (my translation).



other ways of constructing worlds, in terms of expectations and experiences, fields of opportunities and frames of reference<sup>43</sup>.

If we set out to describe ethnographically the world without assuming the existence of ‘the economy’, but look at the ways people conceive and act to live and lead a “good life”, new understandings may emerge. How do people differently cope with structural uncertainty and deal with the possible contradictions between longing for autonomy and need of security? In what situations do they privilege friends over money, or money over friends? Church over family? Going to school over going to the field? What are the requirements to validate one’s claim to be a “good person”? In rural Pernambuco, this entails for an adult male being “a good head of family”, one of the duties of which is “sustaining the house”, while an adult woman is judged according to her performance as being a “housewife” (*dona de casa*), taking proper care of the house and children. If we look at the ways people struggle to achieve these aims, we will encounter many practices that are usually dealt with under the label of ‘economic practices’, but might be more fruitfully approached as “conditions for life and good life”. What are the conditions for imagining a future? What makes life a “proper life”? Conversely, at what point does life become “unbearable”? How do people face radical changes in their fields of opportunities and frames of reference, in situations such as war, revolution, migration, displacement, land reform, economic crisis?

Highlighting alternative local frames may in turn allow us to challenge the way we see our world through this overarching economic framework. Such an approach might eventually shed light on the ways people live and interpret their lives in our own “economicised world”, and on the political and social conditions for the existence of “the economy” as a privileged frame of reference, such as sense of “security”, the stabilization of expectations and a capacity to control the future, ultimately guaranteed by the State. I suggest that we use such alternative frames of reference that do not take ‘the economy’ for granted, as a lever to de-center our way of looking at our own world. *Esperar* in a situation of “radical uncertainty” may thus open up the hope for a radical rethinking of the economy. For this, we need first to *un-think* ‘the economy’ as a given framework.

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Fields of opportunities’ and ‘frames of reference’ are tools that might be used in such a task in order to go beyond our taken-for-granted division of life into distinct spheres.

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